Jewish Theological Responses to the Holocaust

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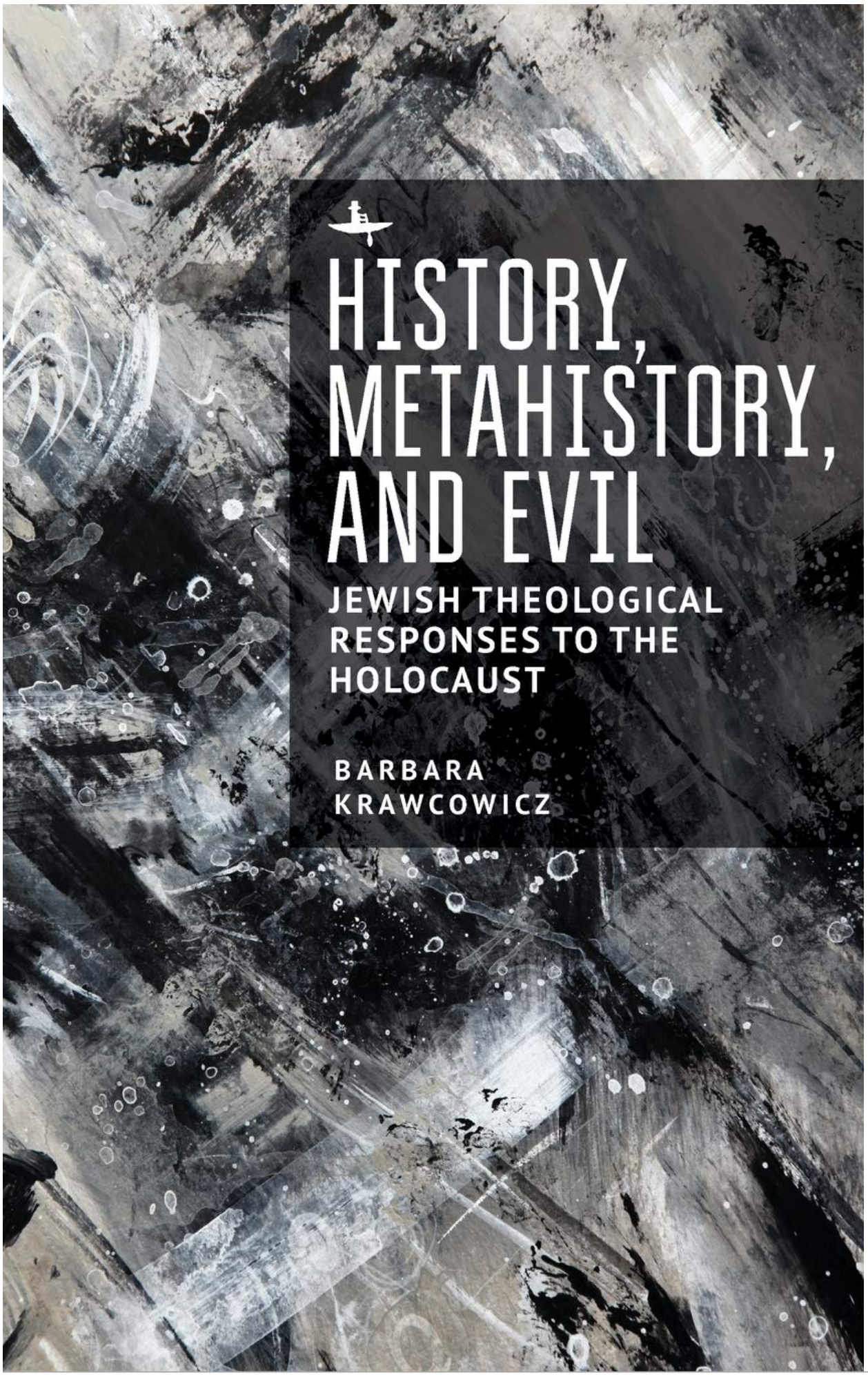
Barbara Krawcowicz: History, Metahistory, and Evil: Jewish Theological Responses to the Holocaust.Brookline: Academic Studies Press, 2020. 242 pp. $109.00 (cloth)



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From the early 1940s through the government of Menachem Begin in the late 1970s, there was trenchant debate in Israeli society regarding the proper day to commemorate the Holocaust: should the Shoah be added to the already formidable list of tragedies mourned on the Ninth of Av, or does it require its own day?[1] Lurking behind this practical question is a more theoretical question that has, somewhat oddly, accompanied Holocaust studies over the past few decades: is the Holocaust somehow ontologically unique in the annals of humanity, or at least of the Jewish people, or is it just the latest and most lethal in a long line of catastrophes?

The question animates passionate debates whenever the Holocaust is invoked as relevant to some other catastrophe or even genocide. Do comparisons with other events trivialize the Shoah? Or is that the whole point of the "never again" mantra? These debates regularly provide fodder for social media contretemps, where, untheorized, the actual question of uniqueness often goes unexamined. Perhaps more surprisingly, this question has been debated by historians, as well. Comparisons both to other twentieth-century events like Joseph Stalin's reign of terror and to other, more distant genocides over the course of the centuries serve to assess the question of whether the Holocaust deserves more attention, or a different kind of attention, than other gruesome and horrifying events in Jewish or world history.[2]

Much of "post-Holocaust theology" in North America has started from the assumption that the Holocaust cannot be accommodated by any extant theory of history. In this book, Barbara Krawcowicz lucidly and elegantly shows that this is precisely the most important question that must be addressed in any theological approach to the Holocaust. The thin volume packs an intellectually hefty punch. After an introduction, the book falls into three parts, organized theologically. The first part discusses Rabbis Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich, Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer, and Yissakhar Shlomo Teichtal, who each lived in Europe and did not survive the Holocaust, and asserted that there was nothing about the cataclysm swirling around them that challenged old theological categories or necessitated new ones. The second part analyzes Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, and Eliezer Berkovits, who each lived in North America after the Shoah and argued that the old way of thinking about history had been shattered by the Holocaust. The third part examines Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (more on his significance for Krawcowicz's story below).

At the heart of the book is the notion of "paradigmatic thinking."[3] This approach to history, which is amorphously religious or mystical at its core, assumes that history moves in recognizable patterns. On the Jewish side, the midrashic line *ma'asei 'avot siman la-banim* is the most frequently cited formulation of this idea, but it goes far beyond a typological approach to biblical narratives, such as that championed by Na?manides. Paradigmatic thinking is what allows Rome to be identified as Esau or various enemies of the Jews—from Haman to Adolf Hitler—to be identified as Amalek. The fundamental idea is that while the surface structure of history changes from generation to generation, the deep structure remains the same.[4]

While such an approach may seem emotionally crushing—must it always be that Esau will despise Jacob?—it also provides a theologically comfortable lens through which to understand events in the world. The latest people to rise up against the Jews are pragmatically painful but theologically comforting: *of course* they are, because that is the way the world works. As the Haggadah puts it: "It is not that one [nation] stood against us to finish us off, but in every generation there are people who stand against us to finish us off—and the Holy One, blessed be He, saves us from their hand." Circularly, each event that is seen as an instance of the paradigm also confirms the validity of the paradigm.

It is with this intellectual background and theology in hand that Rabbis Ehrenreich, Unsdorfer, and Teichtal approached the Holocaust. The Nazis were horrible, but so were the Babylonians, Romans, and Crusaders. As Krawcowicz elegantly puts it: the Esau/Jacob paradigm "proved viable as a source of meaning during the times of the dominion of Rome and later when the

Roman eagle was replaced by the Christian cross. It did not lose its explanatory power when the enemy bore the symbol of the swastika" (p. 52). The Nazis may have been *quantitatively* worse, as they had more efficient weapons, better planning, modern communication and transportation systems, and so on, but they were not *qualitatively* different. None of these rabbis, therefore, felt that the categories they had were inadequate to the task of making sense of the events of the 1940s. Rabbi Unsdorfer summed this up quite pithily: "If we probe the portion of the week ... we will find that God spoke explicitly about the current situation" (p. xvii).

Rabbi Ehrenreich did not hesitate to identify the Jews whose sins had brought the world to this point: assimilationists and Zionists. Krawcowicz makes the important point that Ehrenreich (and many others) emphatically blamed the victim in pinpointing the sins. There is nothing logically wrong with blaming the victim; sometimes the victim is in fact to blame. More than that, it is precisely what the biblical prophets and Talmudic sages did. Indeed, this is at the heart of paradigmatic thinking: the Jews suffer for the Jews' sins. Anything else would be far more problematic. Krawcowicz points out that in the later years of the war, Ehrenreich's references to Zionism dwindled; she argues that this is not because his views on Zionism changed but because his focus shifted away from blame toward the topic of redemption.

Despite the convictions of these thinkers that history made sense, they conceded that the answers were not always actually available to human minds. Rabbi Unsdorfer ended one sermon with the claim that he and his contemporaries, like the mother of seven martyrs in the Talmudic story, can now go to Abraham and tell him that they had superseded him, since he was *willing* to sacrifice his son, but they had actually done so. And then he wrote: "It is impossible to go further into the matter. For it is dangerous. We are not permitted even to cry out" (pp. 74-75). Silence is not a challenge to the paradigm; it is part of it.

Rabbi Teichtal, who is popular among religious Zionists for having advocated mass emigration from Europe to Israel, seems different from Ehrenreich and Unsdorfer, who were violent opponents of Zionism. And yet Krawcowicz shows that in Teichtal's conception of history and the Holocaust's place within it, he belongs with the other two. Teichtal did think the Holocaust was worse than any previous catastrophe, but only as a matter of degree, not of kind. In fact, his advocacy of migration to Israel only makes sense in the context of his metahistorical approach; to effect a rapprochement between God and the Jewish people, they need to do a national act of *teshuva*, of literal returning, and mass migration would be that act.

Unlike the thinkers discussed in part 1, the North American theologians in part 2 rejected the value of paradigmatic thinking for making sense of the Holocaust. Krawcowicz shows that for Rubenstein in particular, the paradigm was not shattered by the Holocaust but had eroded earlier. This well-documented argument serves first of all to correct the historical record, as Rubenstein has generally been understood as denying a covenantal approach to history *because* of the Holocaust. But this is more than a minor point of intellectual history; it actually provides one of the primary arguments of this book. Rubenstein rejected paradigmatic thinking not on the basis of a particular historical fact but because he did not believe that history worked that way. Indeed, he was a child of the Enlightenment who assumed historical events have historical causes and cannot be explained as instantiations of cosmic patterns in time. This post-Enlightenment *historicism*, discussed in detail by Krawcowicz, entails a fundamental rejection of the paradigmatic approach to history. Once Rubenstein rejected paradigmatic thinking, the Holocaust could of course no longer be seen as part of a paradigm. There are no paradigms. Later on, Rubenstein wrote adamantly that the Holocaust exploded any idea of covenantal patterns in history, but this puts the cart in front of the horse intellectually: for a modern thinker, the idea exploded long before the Holocaust. More generally, Krawcowicz effectively argues, many theologians attribute their denial of paradigmatic thinking to the Holocaust while in fact the sources of their denial lies elsewhere. As the examples of Unsdorfer, Ehrenreich, and Teichtal show, there is nothing about the Holocaust that *requires* a rejection of paradigmatic thinking.

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Fackenheim plays a particularly important role in Krawcowicz's story because he changed his mind on the central question of whether traditional approaches to history could accomodate the Holocaust. In his early writings, Fackenheim argued that by definition, no historical event could affect the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people—nothing between Sinai and the Messiah actually mattered, covenantally. But by 1968, he had changed his view and began to argue that in modern times, God was seen specifically in the arena of history. As a result, certain "epoch-making" events make "a new claim upon the Jewish faith" (p. 100). Krawcowicz shows that this view is the theological revolution. The nature of that claim is a secondary question; the most radical idea here is simply that events matter and cannot be simply assimilated to broad patterns in history.

In the third and final part of the book, we come to Rabbi Shapira, author of the sermon collection first published under the title *Esh Kodesh*. Shapira's thought has been the beneficiary of intense interest and scholarship in recent years, including a new and much-improved edition of his sermons (see the references on pages 157-58, notes 2 and 5). The paradigmatic thinkers in part 1 made two claims: history works in paradigms, and the Holocaust fits neatly into one such paradigm. Rubenstein and Fackenheim had to reject the second claim because they rejected the first claim. For Krawcowicz, Shapira plays a crucial role because he, uniquely, accepted the first claim and eventually rejected the second claim anyway. In other words, he is the only thinker who believed that the covenantal relationship is the key to history and yet, over the course of 1941, came to the conclusion that the Holocaust cannot be accommodated to that pattern.

Krawcowicz makes good use of the recent re-edition of Shapira's sermons by Daniel Reiser, which allow us to see the developments of Shapira's thought over the course of his three years of sermonizing in the Warsaw Ghetto. In a careful reading of the entire collection, Krawcowicz lays out how Shapira's thought was, and was not, consistently traditional. But the most wrenching—and fascinating—change in his thought is reflected in a note appended in 1942 to his Hanukkah sermon from 1941. In the earlier sermon, he had explicitly said there was nothing fundamentally new in the current events. In 1942, he reversed this judgment: "Only the suffering up to the end of 5702 had previously existed. The unusual suffering, the evil and grotesque murders that the wicked, twisted murderers innovated for us, the House of Israel, from the end of 5702, in my opinion—from the worlds of the Sages of blessed memory and the chronicles of the Jewish people in general—there never was anything like them" (p. 175).[5] In Shapira's thought, we see the paradigm actually breaking.

Krawcowicz's contribution is not in presenting new material; the figures discussed have all been studied previously and in detail, and Krawcowicz cites most of the relevant literature.[6] She gives appropriate credit to Gershon Greenberg for his work on the ultra-Orthodox thinkers discussed in part 1 and interacts with major interpreters, such as Steven T. Katz, Michael L. Morgan, and Zachary Braiterman throughout part 2.[7] Instead, the book breaks new ground in putting disparate figures together and then identifying and articulating the single question that all theologians struggling with the Shoah have to answer: does this fit the historical paradigm of Jewish history? As Krawcowicz shows so well, the approach that thinkers take to the Holocaust generally flows from their prior historiosophical assumptions. When it comes to theology, "data" and "interpretation" are entirely inseparable. This book does an excellent job of analyzing and articulating the assumptions that flow into different theologies of the Shoah.

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[1] See discussion in Jacob J. Schacter, "Holocaust Commemoration and Tish'a be-Av: The Debate over 'Yom ha-Sho'a,'" *Tradition* 41 (2008): 164-97.
[2] For recent discussions, see Richard J. Evans, *"Was the 'Final Solution' Unique?" in The Third Reich in History and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 365-89; and Steven T. Katz, "The Issue of the Uniqueness of the Holocaust: After Forty Years of Study," Modern Judaism 40 (2020): 48-70.
[3] See also Barbara Krawcowicz, "Paradigmatic Thinking and Holocaust Theology," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 22 (2014): 164-89. [4] It should be said that this is the dominant, but not only, view found in biblical and rabbinic texts. For alternatives, see the discussion of Psalm 44 in Dalit Rom-Shiloni, ????? ????? ?? ????? ???????: ????????? ?????? (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2009). For rabbinic examples, see the discussions and sources in Adiel

Schremer, "'The Lord Has Forsaken the Land': Radical Explanations of the Military and Political Defeat of the Jews in Tannaitic Literature," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 59 (2008): 183-200; and Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
[5] See James A. Diamond, "The Warsaw Ghetto Rebbe: Diverting God's Gaze from a Utopian End to an Anguished Now," *Modern Judaism* 30 (2010): 299-331, esp. 307, not cited by Krawcowicz.
[6] For a superb collection of sources, together with historical and conceptual analyses, see Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds., *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
[7] See, for example, Gershon Greenberg, "The Suffering of the Righteous according to Shlomo Zalman Unsdorfer of Bratislava, 1939-1944," in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, ed. John K. Roth, Elizabeth Maxwell, Margot Levy, and Wendy Whitworth (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 422-38; Gershon Greenberg, ''Shlomo Zalman Ehrenreich's Religious Response to the Holocaust: February 1939-October 1943; Simleul-Silvanei (Szilagysomlyo) Transylvania,'' *Studia Judaica* 9 (2000): 65-93; Steven T. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues: Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1983); Michael L. Morgan, *Dilemmas in Modern Jewish Thought: The Dialectics of Revelation and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and Zachary Braiterman, *(God) after Auschwitz: Tradition and Change in Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

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